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RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ 3747  
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RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 2338  
RUEHRG/AMCONSUL RECIFE 4037  
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SUBJECT: QUILOMBO COMMUNITIES SERVE AS MODERN-DAY REMINDER OF  
BRAZIL'S SLAVERY PAST

REF: A) 07 Sao Paulo 895 B) 07 Sao Paulo 976 C) 07 Sao Paulo 1002

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Summary

1. (SBU) As Brazil enjoys economic prosperity and growth, the plight of the Brazilian quilombos highlights that racial and income inequality persists. Although founded centuries ago, these communities of Afro-Brazilian slave descendants still serve as an important part of the country's legacy of slavery and the fight the Afro-Brazilian community wages for equal treatment today. While quilombos, poor and without representation, maintain their fight to get government recognition and benefits, landowners wage a battle to encroach on these communities' borders. As the disparity between urban rich and rural poor continues to widen, the government cannot afford to overlook quilombos as an integral part of its process of racial and economic integration. End Summary.

Background on Quilombos

2. (U) Brazil's quilombos were communities created by escaped slaves and free-born Afro-Brazilians away from colonial urban centers and white-owned plantations. The quilombos represented communities where African descendants, as well as some indigenous Brazilians and even a few white Brazilians, lived in a free and self-governing society until Brazil abolished slavery in 1888. Brazil's most famous quilombo, Palmares, is located in Serra da Barriga, Alagoas State. Founded in approximately 1605 (scholars disagree on the exact date), the community of ten small townships reached a population of 20,000-30,000 but was destroyed by Portuguese colonial government militias in 1694. The leader of the community, Zumbi dos Palmares, is recognized today as a hero and legend in the Afro-Brazilian community. Zumbi was killed on November 20, 1695 and Brazil's annual Black Consciousness Day is celebrated every November 20 in his honor. Today's quilombos are usually found in the form of small rural towns that are inhabited by

mostly Afro-Brazilian descendants of the original founders. The quilombos represent the memory of Brazil's long history of slavery and provide a cultural link to the various African nations from which Portuguese colonists imported slaves.

¶3. (U) Most quilombolas, residents of quilombos, work today raising subsistence crops or making handicrafts. The communities face serious challenges in health, infrastructure and education. Research indicates that the standard of living in quilombos is among the poorest in the country when compared with other Brazilian communities, rural or urban. Central government statistics indicate that the majority of quilombola families rely on money distributed through national social programs. In 2003, several federal organizations conducted a survey within 144 quilombo communities and found that 87.5 percent of their inhabitants were relying on public pensions, and of this figure, 48 percent also received assistance from other social programs. On Black Consciousness Day in 2007, President Lula announced the "Social Agenda for Quilombolas" Program which would include a three-year USD 1.2 billion plan to provide electricity and funding for cultural activities to quilombos. The government is also considering expanding its stipend program and infrastructure support for many of these communities.

#### Differences Over Defining Quilombos

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¶4. (SBU) As part of its broad calls for reform throughout Brazil, the Constitution of 1988 aimed to bring a measure of social justice to the Afro-descendant community after years of neglect. One of the Constitution's methods for achieving this goal was to guarantee land ownership to descendants of the original quilombos. While a major achievement for some sectors of the Afro-Brazilian community - an overwhelming majority live in cities and towns rather than in these rural outposts - the land recognition process for a quilombo remains

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slow and politically challenging. President Lula's government has pledged to focus on this issue as part of its larger plan to create policies encouraging the development of the greater Afro-Brazilian community.

¶5. (U) According to the NGO Pro Indian Commission of Sao Paulo, an organization that is active in both indigenous and quilombo rights, the Government of Brazil officially recognizes 82 areas throughout the country as quilombos. The number is significantly smaller than a Brazilian Institute of Geographic Statistics (IBGE) 2000 survey finding the existence of 743 quilombos and a University of Brasilia (UnB) 2005 study that found 2,228 quilombos in Brazil. (The UnB estimates that 2 million quilombolas are living in areas claimed as quilombos today.) The Palmares Cultural Foundation, the government agency responsible for supporting Afro-Brazilian history, recognizes 1170 quilombos. Discrepancies arise about the actual number of quilombos due to the fact that many communities describe themselves as such, as opposed to waiting for the slow and lengthy government recognition process. UnB researchers also believe that the number of quilombos grew following the 1988 constitutional provisions because many non-quilombolas moved into the communities to gain land ownership rights. The main difficulty in recognizing a community is proving that an area was in fact a quilombo in the past, defining its boundaries, and identifying the actual descendants of the original population. The process involves historical and geographic research, anthropological analysis, and physical evidence, usually taking a number of years. (Comment: Interlocutors informed Poloff that the National Institute of Colonization and Land Reform (INCRA), the agency charged with recognizing quilombos, was much more efficient during the administration of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), spurred by the 1988 Constitution and the government's efforts to begin pursuing racial equality programs, as opposed to the current presidency of Luis Inacio Lula da Silva ("Lula") despite his repeated calls for racial equality and his more populist rhetoric on the issue. End Comment.)

#### Opposition Muddles Quilombo Recognition Process

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¶6. (SBU) In 2003, President Lula signed a decree designed to

streamline the quilombo recognition process. In one of this presidential declaration's more controversial provisions, the order accepts self-proclaimed declarations of ancestry as meeting the requisite proof for land ownership as long as the Palmares Cultural Foundation certifies. The intent of the presidential decree was to facilitate the quilombo land rights process, but instead it created significant resistance from rural landowners, backed by strong congressional interest. These mostly large-scale farmers, almost exclusively not of African-descent, perceived that any ownership claim over productive land could threaten some of their own properties or areas for potential expansion. The Democratic Party (DEM), supported by many of these rural landowners, presented an appeal against the presidential decree to the Superior Federal Tribunal (STF) contesting its constitutionality and a bill undoing the executive order in the Chamber of Deputies. Recognizing opposition to the decree, the government stepped back in 2007 and made some changes in the way the Palmares Foundation would issue certification of quilombolan descent. According to the 2007 modifications, a majority vote within the quilombo must support an individual's claim of quilombola descent for the Foundation even to consider the case. Unsatisfied by the alteration, the DEM bloc continues to press with its STF appeal and House legislation.

Comment

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¶7. (SBU) Throughout Brazil's history, quilombos represented bastions of freedom for African descendants who united to act in opposition to and at times armed revolt against the cruelty of slavery. Today, quilombos serve not only as a reminder of this sad legacy and courageous resistance, but as a symbol of the inequalities found between Afro-Brazilians and their white neighbors. The Brazilian Government will have to confront the

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political and economic inequality found in these communities in order that the entire Brazilian society reaps the benefits of the current economic expansion. End Summary.

¶8. (U) This cable was coordinated with and cleared by Embassy Brasilia.

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